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Authors	Shelton, Fiona
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Teacher Quality and Effectiveness: Challenges and Opportunities

Fiona Shelton, University of Derby, Department of Professional Studies, England

Abstract

Effective teaching is defined by Coe, Aloisi, Higgins and Major (2014) as that which leads to improved student achievement using outcomes that matter to their future success. Whilst defining effective teaching is not easy, the research keeps coming back to this critical point; student progress is the yardstick by which teacher quality should be assessed. Well motivated, skilled teachers are at the heart of effective schools. Schools need to attend to the quality of teachers using a range of monitoring strategies. Teachers require access to opportunities for formal and informal professional development and understand the value of this for the schools objectives and the development of their own careers. The best teachers help young people to develop the capacity to reflect on and recognise their contribution to their world, its value and their developing spirit.

Key words: effectiveness, quality, professional, progress, learning

1. Data, data and more data...

The English education system has for many years been awash with data.

According to Earl and Fullan (2003), England arguably has more data

and more sophisticated data about education than any other jurisdiction in the world. Many datasets are collected and analysed for the purpose of self-evaluation and school improvement but many are used for inclusion in the infamous English school league tables, formulated each year and published by the media, following the government release of its annual summary of school performance data. Data plays a large role in the English education system. School leaders publish data, which is often found on school websites, on the performance of children in national curriculum assessments. These are a series of educational assessments colloquially known as SATS (Standard Assessment Tests) undertaken annually. This data is used by Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, this is our school inspectorate) to make judgments about the quality of teaching in schools and there are opportunities for school leaders to make comparisons against similar schools at the click of a button.

1.2 The purpose of SATs

The original purpose of SATs papers, when they were first introduced in 1991, was to create a standardised, consistent assessment for all pupils regardless of who their teacher was and indeed where their school was.

However, there are challenges too and it is arguable that their primary purpose has seemed to develop into feeding a school league table system, adding stress to pupils and unnecessary pressure onto teachers, and given the the significant changes to their structure over time these comparisons could be questionable now.

1.3 The new curriculum

With the advent of a new curriculum in 2014, the 2014-2015 academic year was the final year of the old-style KS2 SATs and a new format was announced for the 2015-2016 academic year. There is no pass mark for the SATs, so children cannot fail a test, but under the old curriculum, children's marks were translated into "levels". These levels described the expectations of a child and whether they were meeting them, exceeding them or indeed whether they needed a little extra support or greater challenge. This has now changed to a score of 100 which represents the expected standard that children should reach. Those children scoring significantly over 100 will have been deemed to exceed the expected standard whilst those scoring significantly below will have not reached the expected standard. Of course, tests like this only reveal so much and must be considered alongside teacher assessment, which will give a

judgement of classroom ability. When judging teaching effectiveness then, one might conclude that test scores are the measure of a good teacher. Whilst there may be some truth in this, and there is growing evidence from the United States and England which shows a significant correlation between teacher evaluations and exam results, evidence also suggests that schools should rely on a combination of approaches to gain a fuller picture of teacher effectiveness, and that teachers should be assessed on their cumulative performance over several years rather than on the data from a single year (Murphy, 2013). And so this leads to the main body of this discussion, what does the research tell us about what effective teachers look like, how they behave and the ways in which they work in their classrooms.

1.4 How are we doing?

Until a few years ago, few people in English schools had heard or taken notice of PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) or TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science). However, in more recent years these two sets of measures have gradually exerted greater influence in our English schools. These international statistics went largely unnoticed for many years. The UK, not England alone,

rarely provided a big enough sample of pupil data to be included in the PISA programme. In 2008, when the release of test data from the previous year showed that UK pupils' results had fallen in comparison with other jurisdictions, this changed. Since then any policy change seems to be based on the need to arrest the decline in the performance of English schools as compared to the rest of the world. 'No matter what the tests actually show, the PISA tests are ideal as a baseline for the sort of sound bite politics that the media enjoys' (Waters, 2013: 238).

The evidence from the PISA tests show that the highest achieving pupils in the UK, perform just as well as any across the world. A theme to emerge from literature (Maes, 2010) is the effect that teacher quality can have on the childhood experiences of learners and how this is enormously important in determining student achievement. The (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (*OECD*) analysis asserts that in Scandinavian schools and specifically Finland the 'combination of alternative pedagogic approaches rather than mere instructional methods are utilised by teachers and this leads to greater creativity, productivity and innovation' (cited in Waters, 2013: 238). So rote learning and passive approaches to understanding will not help

young people achieve. What they actually require is a range of learning experiences that are authentic and enable application of knowledge and skills in worthwhile, real world contexts. This requires excellence in teaching and excellence in understanding learning; the most effective teachers do it very well.

2. School improvement and school effectiveness

The research literature on school improvement and school effectiveness tends to concentrate on teachers, school leaders, teaching and learning, pupil progress and the learning environment. In England, the definition of school improvement is often highly variable, at times focusing only on Ofsted or attainment and at other times focusing on a broader definition of school effectiveness, there is a need for a more critical interrogation of this concept. But there are a number of useful lessons that can be drawn from the literature which might inform the development of school improvement programmes. For example, teachers are at the heart of effective schools and quality of instruction is at the heart of all frameworks of teaching effectiveness (Coe et al, 2014). Well motivated, skilled professionals are key to effective schools and school leaders need to attend to the quality of teachers using a range of monitoring strategies.

Teachers should have access to opportunities for formal and informal professional development and understand the value of this for the schools' objectives and their own careers (Neary, Hooley, Hewitt, Mieschbueler, Dodd and Langley, 2014). Leaders and leadership are critically important in offering a vision and enabling it to be realized.

2.1 School leaders

School leaders can make a big difference to the effectiveness of the school, especially those who have a vision and are good at communicating it and motivating staff. These leaders are also good at building alliances and partnerships within and beyond the school.

Effective leaders distribute leadership and surround themselves with talented middle leaders who they develop. However, within this there are a number of well evidenced strategies for great teaching that all schools should engage with. These include having teachers who know their subject, can use a range of instructional strategies, create a good climate in the classroom and manage students' behaviour (Neary et al, 2014).

The learning environment matters. Effective schools offer positive learning environments that provide a good context for the school's teaching and learning, making effective use of new technologies.

Effective schools draw on a wide range of help and support and build partnerships with other schools and stakeholders. School improvement requires schools to change, this change is often facilitated by the involvement of external stakeholders. In the long term, effective schools build collaborative partnerships for mutual benefit with other schools and key stakeholders. Poultney, 2016: 84 states that ‘in today’s fast-paced education world, teachers need to be able to embrace and react to change, and building their own knowledge networks might be one way of making sense of their everyday practice.’ And of course context matters, not all schools are the same. Schools which operate in low socio-economic contexts or which experience all kinds of challenging circumstances may have to approach school improvement in different ways to other schools. School improvement takes time and sustaining it is difficult. School improvement requires a large number of different actors (school leaders, teachers, parents, students) to change the way that they act and the way that they perceive the school, inevitably this takes time.

2.2 Defining effective teaching

What makes great teaching is difficult to define, but common to most

definitions is 'that teaching which leads to improved student progress' (Coe et al, 2014: 2). Whilst defining effective teaching is not easy, the research keeps coming back to this critical point; student progress is the yardstick by which teacher quality should be assessed. According to Coe et al (2014: 2-3), there are six common components suggested by research that teachers should consider when assessing teaching quality. It is likely that good quality teaching will involve a combination of these attributes, manifested at different times and the very best teachers are those that demonstrate all of these features consistently.

Pedagogical content knowledge: The most effective teachers have deep knowledge of the subject they teach and understand the ways students think about the content and identify students' common misconceptions.

Quality of instruction: This includes elements such as effective questioning and use of assessment, reviewing previous learning and progressively introducing new learning (scaffolding) are described as elements of high quality instruction.

Classroom climate: The quality of interactions between teachers and students and teachers' expectations, the need to create a classroom that is constantly demanding more, whilst still recognising student self worth.

Classroom management: Teachers abilities to make efficient use of lesson time, the coordination of classroom resources and space, as well as managing the behaviour in the classroom to maximise learning potential and opportunities. These environmental factors on necessary for good learning.

Teacher beliefs: Knowing why teachers adopt particular practices, their theories about what learning is and how it happens, and their conceptual models of the nature and role of teaching in the learning process all seem to be important too.

And finally professional behaviours: Behaviours exhibited by teachers such as reflecting on and developing professional practice and participation in professional development.

So effective teachers are responsible for their own professional development and for supporting colleagues. Poultney, 2016: 85 explains that building capacity for learning can help leaders to 'change hearts and minds and encourage teachers to re-focus on their pedagogy to make learning happen'.

3. So...?

Aspirations have become a key policy driver in the UK and are seen as one of the critical levers for improving educational attainment (St Clair and Benjamin, 2011). If we want children to aspire, they require real-world examples of what they are learning about. Children require the constant example and articulation of the real world (Waters, 2013).

Teacher effectiveness is not simply about being a good ‘performer’ in the learning space. Effective teachers take ownership of their professional development, their autonomy and their professional authority and use the classroom to engage in practice which creates a climate for learning.

3.1 And finally

The very best teachers understand that learning requires a pedagogy where children are encouraged to think critically, to solve problems and understand why what they have learned can have a transformative effect on their outlook on the world. The very best teachers understand that learning requires a pedagogy where children should be encouraged to think critically, to solve problems and understand why what they have learned can have a transformative effect on their outlook on the world (Shelton, 2016).

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Fiona Shelton: I am the Head of the Department of Professional Studies at the University of Derby where I am responsible for all Initial Teacher Education programmes. I am thrilled to be working with teachers of the

future and strive to make a difference to education in our regional schools. Email: f.shelton@derby.ac.uk